

Flooding in Brockenhurst

Historically, Brockenhurst has experienced flooding from the forest to the watersplash with over 100 properties flooded in 1966. In the mid 1990's a flood alleviation scheme was implemented which is understood to afford protection up to 1 in 25-year events. The measures taken were semi-permanent and did not envisage any climate change. In 2016 The Government launched the Flood Resilience Review (FRR) which advocated the use of Natural Flood Management, (NFM), as the fastest and most cost-effective way to improve flood resilience and counter the impacts of climate change. £15m was allocated for community-led NFM demonstration projects.

Fortunately, Peter Hebard, a Chartered Engineer and member of the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management with some expertise and experience of flood resilience management had attended the launch of FRR and volunteered to set up Brockenhurst Flood Action Group (BFAG). They prepared a bid for FRR funding but certain Parish Council regulatory constraints at the time precluded them from receiving sufficient funds. However, a year later the Southern Regional Flood and Coastal Committee decided to fund 4 feasibility studies across the region into NFM and Brockenhurst was selected for one of them. It took several years for the contract to be placed with Wessex River Trust who were chosen by the EA to carry out a paper study. Although the BFAG proposal aimed to implement NFM on the three main tributaries of the Lymington River the paper study was based on the Weirs tributary, the smallest of the four.

The Paper Study of NFM on the Weirs and Potential Implementation.

In anticipation of contract placement, BFAG made contact with the principal private landowners and identified locations, opportunities and sources of funding in the hope that NFM could be implemented soon after the completion of the study. However, the contract was placed late and WRT chose or were directed to develop their own ideas initially, only meeting up with BFAG a year later. They were then briefed by BFAG on the key locations, given a tour of them and introduced to relevant private landowners. These included some downstream sites such as Martins Road which is not included in WRT's final report. Subsequent to the meeting Peter provided additional information and photographs to WRT.

As a general comment on flood issues the EA representative stated that their prime responsibility with respect to flooding is to institute measures of mitigation in areas where properties have been flooded. However that misunderstands the philosophy behind the FRR and NFM, which is to address Climate Change induced threats of both surface water (and highway) flooding, the responsibility of HCC, and property/ fluvial flooding, the responsibility of the EA, collectively and to manage water to best effect for both ecology and economy.

Since progress on the paper study was slow, BFAG arranged for the parish council to chair a meeting for the stakeholders to come to Brockenhurst for a tour of the area and a presentation on the Brockenhurst flooding position and the proposed remedies to mitigate the flooding. For those stakeholders who could not get to the first presentation and other senior Forest executives BFAG provided individual tours afterwards. All said that they were satisfied with their visits and understood the problems and committed look at what they could do to help. The only stakeholder who refused the invitation for a one-to-one was visit Natural England, (NE) who claimed they would only talk to individual landowners and had no responsibility for flood issues. However, they do have responsibility for restoring wetlands and protecting ecology from climate change induced drought, a particular problem for central southern England and the New Forest. As BFAG explained, NFM can address that cost-effectively on an order of magnitude larger scale than current NE/ FE measures aimed at restoring individual SSSIs to "Good Environmental Status".

A draft report has now been produced and presented to those considered stakeholders. The Parish Council and BFAG were not included in this. After chasing we were sent a copy of the draft report. We have not had any formal feedback of the stakeholder views but we understand there was some skepticism about the need to have flooding measures for Brockenhurst, in contrast to the evidence given in the report itself and of storms, this winter and last, which despite the best efforts of Hants Highways, Network Rail, Hoteliers, Landowners and residents coordinated by BFAG, storms have repeatedly flood roads, out buildings and threatened properties. FE, NE, the NFNPA and the EA refused any substantive support.

BFAG has responded with comments and practical suggestions as to how NFM could be implemented but as yet we have no statement from the EA as to the way forward, despite highlighting that some landowners are keen to implement key part on their own land, using their own resources at their own cost on their own land.

The Golf Course, in particular, has been keen to divert excess storm water from a Weirs tributary through a cascade of holding ponds thereby not only reducing the peak flood level through Brockenhurst that valuable water being lost to the Solent. As it is not SSSI land all they need to proceed is revision to their extraction licence,

It is possible that some action will be proposed in the final report which we are asking for, together with the feedback from the other recipients. We could then meet with all the interested parties to agree strong partnerships as indicated in the opening objectives of the study. We were hoping for a neighbourly response but we cannot wait forever - rainfall intensity of latest storms is already 5 times what was in 2016 when BFAG was first founded.

Actions needed

1. Pursue receipt of the final report and participants comments
2. Continue to carry out the efforts to clear the drainage systems at the key points that have flooded. Most of this can be carried out by liaising with HCC and Network Rail, landowners getting permission if any work requires this. FE have refused to support the removal of one tree downstream which has now moved even further to partially obstruct the Lymington river in flood conditions.
3. Exceptions to this are the Watersplash/ Burley Road area. This can only be done if at least two of the possibilities listed in the draft WRT report can be carried out. Progress has been slow in getting any agreement on the report. Our District Councillor is trying to expedite this but it may well be that we have to do more, including contacting our MP and greater public awareness. A section on our website about flooding needs to be set up.
4. Since FE and NE seem to be the main stumbling block, we need to convince them about the urgency to proceed
5. In parallel with the practical efforts help free obstruction of flood water where possible, using voluntary effort. BFAG already carry out monitoring when flooding is imminent but we are investigating the use of flood wardens to help with other tasks during flooding such as signage. Currently HCC do not allow this.

RJH 10/01/25

CHAIRMAN